CONCLUSION

The Erotics of Urbanity

In *The City as Anthology* I read household anthologies as verbal and visual archives of an entwined urban and erotic form of knowledge that is typically overlooked in the historiography of seventeenth-century Isfahan. Eight residents acted as protagonists in this early modern history of Isfahan (see Map 0.1). By anthologizing their experience of the city, they wrote their relationship to the habitus they helped shaped. Seven men and one woman enacted the gestures, manners, and sensibilities of a shared culture of *adab* that configured their social and erotic relations. Schooled in the politics and aesthetics of Isfahan, residents deployed different media to embody what I have termed urbanity, displaying their mastery of the *adab* of sociability and flaunting their knowledge of the city and its ways. From king to widow, painter to religious scholar, poet to bureaucrat, their authorial voices and habits of writing, reading, seeing, and desiring have grounded my analysis of the urban. A shared phenomenology emerges from these anthologies as residents learned to see the beauty of Isfahan, realized how to read eros in its beauty, cultivated desire for the coy gestures of the beloved, and studied the protocols of writing love in letters to friends. These intimately entangled acts—seeing, reading, desiring, and writing—converge to fashion the urban self through the sensual and the sexual. As authors, the eight protagonists of this book made the city their own, writing their quotidian engagement with friends, kin, and clients and dynamically divulging the many dimensions of the social, cultural, and religious spheres of life in Isfahan.

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Furthermore, these anthologies posit a highly refined sensuality as the prism through which the recognition of a subjective self, family, and beloved friend become tangible in the context of the beauty of Isfahan. The prominence of *'ishq*—the mystic love that is desiring—in household anthologies underscores the emotional apparatus that enables us to trace these protagonists' encounter with Isfahan. Inhabitants deployed the idiom of mystic love to produce their urbanity and exhibit their refinement. Whether as collectors or authors of letters, poetry, drawings, manuals, or essays, men mobilized the idealized rhetoric of beauty and love, fetishized in the figure of the male youth, to engage in politics and to fashion their masculine bonds. Among the cast of characters in this history, one king, Shah Abbas I, composed his anthology in the form of a central square (the Naqsh-i Jahan, analogized to the image of the world) adorned with wall paintings and epigraphy illustrating paradise with all its material delights, including homoerotic pleasures, for residents and visitors to view and to be seduced by. Shah Abbas I's authorizing act, aimed at converting his subjects to Shi'ism, drew men and women into the urban public sphere, which, as this book has shown, was also a sphere of intimate affects. Although it was articulated in a range of idioms and scales, the representation of male homoerotism was ideologically and materially central to Isfahan's social and moral fabric, engraved as it was from the walls of the city center to the images and words collected on sheets of paper in households. Even though household anthologies and their male authors speak in the privileged language of patriarchy, the anthologies themselves were domestic objects, pedagogical tools with which family members across gendered lines could educate themselves and cultivate their relations with kin and friends. In particular, the pedagogical material gathered in anthologies served to educate household members in the *adab* of sociability and decorum. In this respect, gender difference does not seem to matter much in the practice of intimate friendship, where *'ishq* is the ubiquitous emotion that signifies spiritual, familial, and amical ties. The words of one female resident, the Urdubadi widow, illustrate that she too marshaled the rituals and language of mystic love to inscribe her relationship to God, her deceased husband, and a beloved female friend. Although the Urdubadi widow provides suggestive evidence for the practice of intimate female friendships, the question of the practice and acceptance of female homoeroticism more broadly remains speculative. Nonetheless, as manifest in the central square, homoerotic affects were nothing

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less than world-making, and embodied desire was imagined and lived as a site of both power and resistance.

Muhammad Qasim's drawing of the bastinade on the cover of my book encapsulates the social shape and significance of erotic desire for the experience of masculine *adab* in Isfahan. Educating the male child entailed the solicitation but also the taming of homoerotic desire with a disciplinary stick, a technique with which youth were trained into the patriarchal order. The initiation of an apprentice into the circle of his master painter, Muhammad Qasim, reproduces communal hierarchies and symmetries according to age and rank. Men with beards and mustaches bear the regalia of power, from the stick to the book, the pen, and the rosary. A shared performance of *adab* marks the bodily comportment of Muhammad Qasim; in gesture and gaze he embodies the knowledge of the arts and eros, authorizing its transmission to initiate subservient beardless youth into the proper politics of sexuality. Asymmetries of standing between master and student intersect with symmetric associations between friends under the scrutiny of two masters, one of the craft and the other of the spiritual brotherhood. Model affective ties, arranged according to the concepts of *'ishq* and the protocols of friendship, bound together men of all ages in configuring fraternal communities of learning. The didactic message of the bastinade signals to the audience that *'ishq* must also be governed by the *adab* of urbanity to safeguard the prescribed moral and social order. Inscribed in students' notebooks as a first lesson, *'ishq* is to be practiced according to established codes of behavior to ensure the apprentices' submission to their master painter and loyalty to their friends and co-workers. In this context of patronage and apprenticeship, erotic desire operates both through resistance and disavowal, highlighting the social condition that produces sensual affirmation. A traffic of affect, involving pain, pleasure, fear, and agony, forge the emotional bonds that establish social relations. Muhammad Qasim's *Bastinade* signals how sexual desire is experienced through intimate contact with male bodies, as it gives visual form to the epistemology of sexuality that renders intelligible the mutual obligations and the reciprocal relationship binding men in networks at work, at court, in the seminary, and in the city.

In *The City as Anthology* I draw on the analytical purchase of eroticism to provide a distinct vantage point onto the connections between urbanity, friendship, and spirituality. Although this project began by treating the anthology as a genre to understand the city that incited its production, the homoerotic vista provided

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by the anthologies I consider here tendered a cognitive panorama of Isfahan with a view into how the city was materially and affectively performed. Adopting a different way of doing history in the field of early modern Persianate studies, I focus on a discrete moment in the story of Isfahan—when the lines of force between eroticism and passionate friendship were being reinforced—to think more broadly with historians of sexuality about the valences of erotic desires that bound together networks of friends living in previous centuries. Inspired by historian Alan Bray's scholarship on sworn friendships, I adopt his mode of social history by locating religiously sanctioned male bonds within systems of affect and kinship.[1] One of the important contributions of his analysis of Western Europe is that intimate male friendship provided both the terms of social cohesion and the means of its disruption. Moreover, I take up literary critic Valerie Traub's invitation to "think sex with the early moderns," which involves confronting those moments when the meanings of sexuality and eroticism are far from transparent.[2] In an effort to bring the practices of history into dialogue with queer and feminist methodologies, Traub exploits the opacity of sex as a productive way to lay bare the difficulties and impasses historians elide when, and if, we write about our conceptual frames and processes of making sexual knowledge. To this methodological common purpose, I bring the multiple representations and significations of the Persianate concept of *'ishq* to bear through my eight character studies. Considerable historical context informs my reading of the contours and tensions with which residents of Isfahan mobilized the power and pleasures of eros to write and display their *adab* in anthologies.

In this book I explore the capacity for social cohesion that homosocial and homoerotic intimacy awarded and the threat of disruption such intimacy carried over the course of the seventeenth century in a city experiencing exponential growth in wealth, immigration, and public surveillance. To properly historicize the emotions that animated friendships, I focus on the figure of the friend represented in letters, paintings, and love poetry. Collected in household anthologies, the presence of so many epistolary manuals and model letters to a friend (*rasa'il-i ikhvaniyyat*), as well as the personal letters exchanged by friends, first struck me as remarkable. But as I collated fragments of evidence of vows of friendship (*sigha-yi ukhuvvat*), gifts of drawings to friends, and model and personal letters, I began to understand them as speaking to a convention that was far from unusual for the residents who collected them, gifted them, learned from them, and wrote their own loving letters to friends

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in and outside Isfahan. The visual and verbal language of eroticism that friends deployed to convey their moods and dispositions, drawn from already resonant mystic love poetry (*ghazal*), have guided my critical inquiry into the urban history of Isfahan. This language has directed me toward the built environment and the material experience of urban objects, to see, smell, taste, and hear so as to consume eros, for it is these sensual experiences that engendered the lived experience of Isfahan for the one female and seven male characters in this book.

Although my focus is on my protagonists' shared epistemic affinities of sexuality—grounded in affect, kinship, and intimacy—I also compare the affinities to those of other temporalities and geographies. My aim is to provide sufficient historical specificity to the practice of friendship and the forging of social relations so as to facilitate a dialogic engagement between early modern Persianate studies with early modern sexuality studies. By means of my analysis, we can see both similarities and differences with the Western world while adding some thickness to our broader knowledge of sexuality. Thinking sex with the early moderns has compelled me to see erasures that today silence passionate friendships and that obscure the entangled history that love shares with eros and beauty. The early modernity of homoeroticism archived in seventeenth-century household anthologies extends the possibility of the analysis of gender and sexuality to loving friendships that established amical communities in other geographies and temporalities.[3] Whether moving the dialogue eastward to Delhi or westward to Istanbul, Damascus, Cairo, Paris, and London, my project details how erotic sensibilities forged social collectives that shaped the habitus of early modern Isfahan. By the middle of the seventeenth century, residents of Isfahan lived under a new regime of public surveillance, in which a range of techniques and procedures were deployed by the Safavi court, together with the Twelver Shi'a mosque and seminary, to discipline the body's sexuality and the homoerotic culture of urbanity. The stigmatization of homoeroticism and its association with sodomy and boy gazing would reemerge with nationalist projects that rewrote gender roles and sexual desires for Iranian citizens. Here, I posit an early modern genealogy for the *longue durée* history of tensions operative in the erotics of beauty and embodied desire. In her *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards*, Afsaneh Najmabadi has masterfully demonstrated how, by the turn of the twentieth-century, Iran's nationalism closeted the male beloved (*amrad*) and unveiled women to cleanse homosocial spaces from the taint of erotic desire.[4] My history of Isfahan presents

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an *early* emergence of heteroerotic anxieties, provoked by the *adab* of urban love and Sufi homoerotic desire, that in the twentieth century were recuperated to make Iran modern. The contradiction of the sex-gender system underpinning the early modern gendered order at the Safavi court and the city of Isfahan illustrates how male sexual patronage and apprenticeship was practiced through asymmetries of age and rank, authorizing the possibility and visibility of behaviors subversive to that order, to simultaneously cultivate heteroerotic or disguised male homoerotic desire, thus laying the conditions for modernity in Iran to produce its heterosexuality.

* * *

Even though I assume that households discussed, enacted, shared, and compared their curations, I am unable to hear these exchanges. Given this, it is important to acknowledge my choice of the noun *curation* and the verb *curating* to describe the work of both my subjects and myself. As I probe the subjective processes of making urban knowledge, my curation of these anthologies highlights my subject's own curatorial process of collecting material, recording segments of essays and poems, and choosing personal and private letters or talismans. It is these processes, I argue, that composed not only the anthologizing of the city but also the procedures and methods of sex and gender knowledge production.

To investigate the power and the resistance that embodied ideals of love and eros elicited—from the scripted city square to the conventions of model friendship letters—I provide a contrapuntal example of Aqa Mansur's city disturber, because this figure makes public the tensions between spiritual and carnal love. Aqa Mansur's city disturbance is a revelation; he divulges the identity of his beloved Aqa Husayn Ali and makes his secret love a public certainty. Disrupting the *adab* of love's decorum, he evokes the eyelashes of his beloved wrestler, which have "the force of the arm of love," with "the power to pierce open the gazer's heart," so much that he loses consciousness in the *maydan* (central square) and faints in the face of his beloved's beauty in the very space of sovereign authorization. Aqa Mansur explicitly voices the emotional and material processes that his disturbance entailed: "I restrain myself from the tip of my pen upon the page of tulip quality because according to the law [sharia] of *adab*, it is forbidden to write about these hidden secrets [*raz-i nihan*] and unveil them [*parda gusha*] in public."[5] Aqa Mansur deploys the city and sensory travel through it as a remedy, a means to experience love and transform the mystic

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state of abstention and separation from God into a state of ecstatic carnal encounter. In the street of the rag sellers, he guides the reader to imagine the collective body of male beloveds, which he disrobes, starting with the belt and moving all the way to the belly button. Crossing the lines between secrecy and disclosure, Aqa Mansur points his pen at the rag seller's belly button, inviting his readers to imagine the rest. Of significance here is the symbolic language that Aqa Mansur uses to produce erotic knowledge, a shared repository of signs familiar to the entire cast of characters, which gives meaning to the range of erotic sensibilities that fashion urban selves.

Aqa Mansur ends his education of the senses on the rag seller's street with a rebuke to his readers, critiquing those who falsely accused these men of sodomy (*livat*). Rag sellers are sincere lovers whose papermaking craft is the medium for representing intercourse (*sukhan*).[6] Playing on the meaning of the word *intercourse*, Aqa Mansur equates the *adab* of speech (*sukhan*) with the *adab* of erotic desire (*sukhan*), unambiguously merging these two semantic fields of *sukhan* implicit in the discourse of *adab*. His speech classifies eloquence as a modality of the art of flirtation. It was the flamboyant mannerism of sellers of rags, according to Aqa Mansur, that ironically gave them a bad reputation in Isfahan: "Being accused of sodomy, they have been thrown into the abyss of infamy and disgrace."[7] This is the subversive act of transgression with which Aqa Mansur's city disturber troubles the sexual order, transforming shame into piety, in his "religion of love."

As I curate the productions of these seven writers and one painter, certain patterns reveal themselves. The erotic trope of moon-faced beauties who bedazzle the heart of the lover with their coy and colorful styles is a recognizable metaphor for all of them; yet how each fashioned their playful flirtation in deploying these tropes depends on the mannerism of *adab* they embody. Consider, for example, the religious scholar Aqa Husayn Khwansari (d. 1686), who participated in the moral panics and religious refutations against Sufi ecstatic practices of boy gazing. Although Aqa Husayn does not reveal a taste for male homoerotic poetry, he curates essays and poetry on heteroerotic love whose subjects speak to carnal desire and renunciation, mobilizing the very idioms that signify homo-eros in a language of beauty that is genderless. Are these silences in Aqa Husayn's collection indicative of his sexual preference, writing himself as a male youth composing the beauty of spring, figured as a female bride? We will never know with certainty, but male homoerotic desire configured Aqa Husayn's *adab*, whether in his negation of boy

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gazing or in his representation of loving friendships among men. The lines between homo- and heteroerotic desire were mobile and mutable. For Aqa Husayn's son, Aqa Jamal Khwansari (d. 1710), who must have studied the family anthology, his anxiety was transferred onto female friendships and the practice of sworn friendships. In his essay "Beliefs of Women," he imagines the erotic secrets that female friends share as a threat to the reputation of men. By the middle of the seventeenth century, both male and female friendships came under social scrutiny. It is possible that in the environment of male sexual surveillance, the friendship of the Urdubadi widow sparked rumors in her own family circle. In the widow's words, her female companion (*yar*) was "a relative better than any sister, kinder than any of my other relatives";[8] her intimate ties with her surrogate sister exposed the vulnerability of her relations with both male and female kin.

* * *

I have separated anthologies that assembled specialized subjects, such as diplomatic letters, philosophical, medical, or theological treatises, from those interspersed with professional and personal or familial objects. Categorizing anthologies along the lines of genre and modes of curation provides me with the model or rubric of what I have termed household anthologies, which are family archives distinct from single-subject anthologies that were compiled for institutional purposes, such as the transmission of power and knowledge in courtly or religious circles. My retrospective creation of this genre is supported by the table of contents present in both the Khwansari and Urdubadi anthologies; the material is ordered in such a way as to clearly indicate deliberate choices that gave meaning to the multitude of urban texts circulating in Isfahan. Both Aqa Husayn Khwansari's and Muhammad Muʿin Urdubadi's anthologies preserve networks of texts that connected households together with the intersecting lives of teachers, students, friends, and relatives who mattered to each respective family. Helpfully, the two household scribes, Riza Quli and the anonymous Urdubadi scribe, state the exact date they began to assemble their anthologies: 1672 and 1664, respectively. Riza Quli dates the completion of the Khwansari anthology three years later, in 1675. Marking time and labor from the first moment of recording to the finished product illustrates the collective process of how long it took to locate, to curate, and to transform loose sheets of texts, preserved in family libraries and personal city archives, into a distinct codex. Such archival

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details distinguish the Khwansari and Urdubadi anthologies, but they also provide a useful conceptual map of probabilities that I have brought to the hundreds of other anonymous household anthologies I have consulted.

We can glean from these anthologies a surprising amount of information about what mattered to authors and scribes as they collected, selected, inscribed, and rearranged. Originals mattered for the two scribes employed in the Urdubadi and Khwansari households, for these scribes painstakingly note when they record texts from the original, times when they have consulted a fair copy (*raqʿa*), a duplicate (*savad*), or a facsimile (*bayaz*). Aqa Husayn's scribe, Riza Quli, makes sure to note when the hand of his patron or that of the religious dignitary Navvab Isfahani validates the copy (*raqʿa*) of a letter he records. The authenticity of contents assembled not only is a confirmation of accuracy but also becomes a convention of the practice. Time and again, Riza Quli makes his appearance as he collects and archives material for his patron with his own eyes, noting the place and date of copying in Isfahan. Moreover, the Urdubadi practice of collecting, which involved dismantling the codex to incorporate the continued life of the family and reconfiguring the anthology (recorded in red ink), illustrates the temporal process of archiving. The significance of the authorial status of Muhammad Muʿin Urdubadi, who first assembled his family anthology, speaks to the simultaneous importance of the originary and the replicative practice of self-fashioning, where new subjects read past curations to compare, relate, and rewrite their refined selves.

Habits of collecting visual and verbal texts in the domestic sphere generated family archives that simultaneously document the intimate lives of kin and the household's professional and social life *outside* the confines of the home. Not every household had the financial ability to hire a scribe to anthologize the family, of course. Friends must have exchanged poetry, essays, and letters among themselves, engaging their networks in the process of circulating and recording urban knowledge. For example, Mirza Ali Akbar's euphoric love letter to Zahid Khan must have been copied from Mirza Ali's private collection by a trustworthy friend. Even though not widely preserved in Isfahan's household anthologies, Mirza Ali's letter became a model for collectors to delight in, to imitate, and to write their own passion for their beloveds or their fury toward friends who had betrayed the most valued trust of custodianship (*amanat*). The process of inscription, however, is only part of the process of anthologizing the city. Male friendships developed around shared habits

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of viewing and collecting images, which were to be read, discussed, and performed in the bazaars, coffeehouses, and streets of Isfahan. Even when apart, friends communicated their desire to exchange gifts of portraits (*surat*) of beautiful male youth. As we recall, during his travels in Hindustan, Nasira Hamadani (d. 1620) sent a letter to his famous friend in Isfahan, Riza Abbasi. Nasira asks his artist friend to send him a "life-giving human image" as a memento of Isfahan's beauty to gratify his longing and erotic desire (*havas*). The request for a portrait (*surat*) of a male Isfahani beauty was part of the *adab* of masculinity that connected Riza Abbasi to Nasira and his acquaintances in Mughal India. This gift of friendship had the power to forge bonds, as men viewed and communicated the *adab* of aesthetics and erotics beyond imperial dominions.[9] Even as Nasira was boasting about his friendship with the celebrated painter, it was the exchange and the subject of the gift that mattered: "Let me [Nasira] show them [his acquaintances] how your [Riza Abbasi's] paintings encapsulate the beauty of Isfahan."[10]

The homoerotic vista that household anthologies expose brings into sharp focus the materiality of Isfahan with a view onto how the city was affectively seen, read, written, and desired. Nasira's letter to Riza Abbasi circulated widely; written in eloquent poetry and prose, it was prized for its value as an exemplary object of *adab*. The letter quickly became a classic model to emulate and to read in households and friendship circles. Yet Nasira's letter also encapsulates the phenomenology of experience shared by the seven other protagonists of this book. As he lays out the work that portraits perform, he draws on the mystical vocabulary of transcendence to write his yearning for Isfahan's beauty in a language that merges sexual desire with spirituality. Nasira evokes Shah Abbas I's ideal city, analogized to the image of the world, which today remains a metonym for Isfahan (see Map 1.1). But the intimate connections between urbanity, friendship, and spirituality operative in the seventeenth century have been lost to the significance of the central square, Naqsh-i Jahan. Thousands of friendship letters assembled in anthologies sit in Tehran's manuscript libraries, and thousands of portraits of male youth are housed in museums worldwide; their bond and affinity have been severed by our modern taxonomies and habits of collecting. *The City as Anthology* reunites the visual with the verbal to make the city familiar and provides a new and enticing panorama of what it meant to experience early modern Isfahan.

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